



# Johann Sebastian Bach

*Johann Sebastian Bach has done everything completely,  
he was a man through and through.*

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797–1828)

For many music-lovers, the music of J. S. Bach fulfils a profound spiritual need: it has a timeless, other-worldly quality which could only come from a composer who felt himself close to God. Just as Bach's birthplace was overshadowed by the Wartburg mountain, topped by the fortress in which Martin Luther hammered out the fundamental principles of Protestant theology, so his life was dominated by his devotion to the Lutheran faith, and his music was dedicated to its service.

## Early years

Unlike many of his more cosmopolitan contemporaries, Bach spent his entire career in Germany – mostly in the central regions of Thuringia and Saxony. He was born



into a long dynasty of Thuringian organists and composers who worked as church organists and choir-masters, municipal musicians, and at the many small princely or ducal courts which flourished in the region.

Bach's father, Ambrosius, was himself employed as a musician by the town council of Eisenach, where Johann Sebastian was born on 21 March 1685.

After losing both parents by the age of ten, Bach was sent to live at Ohrdruf with his married elder brother, Johann Christoph, who was organist there. It seems likely that Johann Christoph helped with his young brother's musical training, but once Johann Sebastian reached the age of 15, there was no longer room for him in the Ohrdruf household, and he obtained a free place at St Michael's



ABOVE: The house where Bach is believed to have been born in the Rittergasse in Eisenach, Thuringia, now a Bach museum.

ABOVE: Johann Sebastian Bach, four years before his death, in a painting by E. G. Haussmann.

RIGHT: A room in Bach's probable birthplace, containing contemporary instruments.







LEFT: A view of Eisenach, with the Wartburg Castle on the hill behind.



RIGHT: Thomaskirche in Leipzig, where Bach was an organist and choir-master, and where he was subsequently interred.

School in Lüneburg, 320km (200 miles) away in north Germany. There he benefited from a solid musical education and sang in the choir, but his formal education came to an end in 1702.

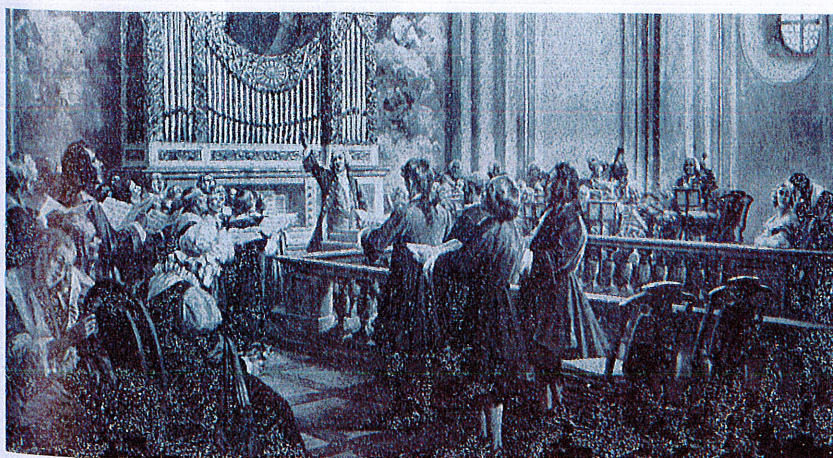
### Arnstadt and Mühlhausen

At the age of 17, Bach returned to his native Thuringia to look for a job. After a temporary spell as a violinist at the Weimar ducal court, he was appointed organist at the New Church in Arnstadt, not far from Weimar. There he started to compose in earnest, and in the winter of

1705–6 he made his legendary pilgrimage (allegedly on foot) to Lübeck, 420km (260 miles) to the north, to hear the celebrated organist Dietrich Buxtehude.

After his return to Arnstadt, Bach's relationship with the church council deteriorated (he had a stubborn and at times arrogant streak, which caused problems with all his employers), and in the summer of 1707 he left to take up a new post as organist at the imperial free city of Mühlhausen, some 58km (36 miles) to the north-west. His salary was now such that he felt able to marry his second cousin, Maria

Barbara Bach. But although his personal life had settled down, Bach quickly became dissatisfied with conditions at Mühlhausen, and in 1708 he moved again, this time to the ducal court at Weimar.



ABOVE: Bach directing a concert in 1714 at the Court Chapel in Weimar, where he worked from 1708 until 1717.

## Life and works

**NATIONALITY:** German

**BORN:** Eisenach, 1685;

**DIED:** Leipzig, 1750

**SPECIALIST GENRES:** Sacred music for the German Protestant liturgy, especially cantatas, instrumental and keyboard music.

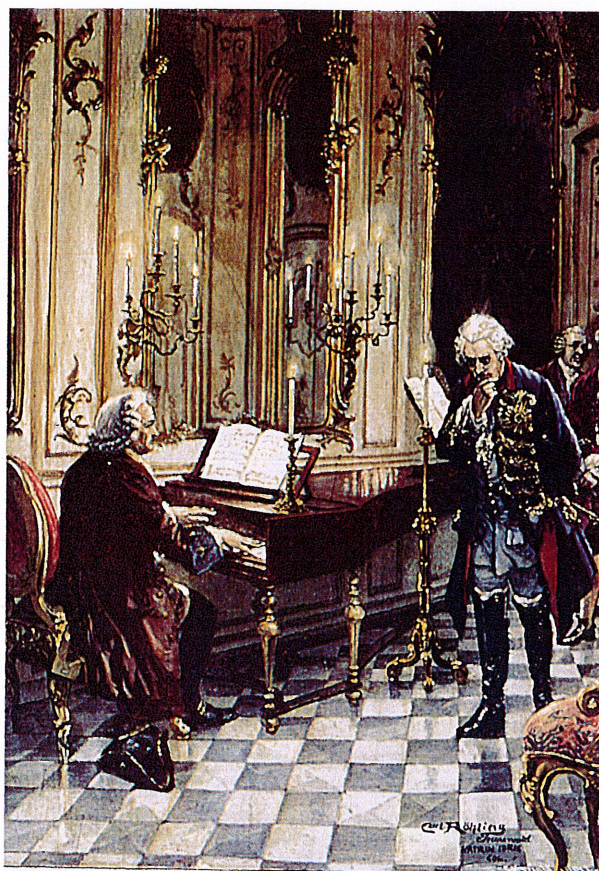
**MAJOR WORKS:** *Brandenburg Concertos* (1721); 4 orchestral suites; 7 harpsichord concertos; 3 violin concertos; *Goldberg Variations* (1722); *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (1722–44); over 200 cantatas; *St John Passion* (1723); *St Matthew Passion* (1729); *Christmas Oratorio* (1734); *Italian Concerto* (1735); *The Musical Offering* (1747); *Mass in B minor* (1749); *The Art of Fugue* (1750).



## Weimar

In the early 18th century Weimar was just another small, provincial town – its period of glory was to come some 80 years later, when its residents would include Goethe, Wieland and Schiller. Bach's job was as organist at the ducal chapel in the castle, but six of his children – including the future composers Wilhelm Friedemann (1710–84) and Carl Philipp Emmanuel (1714–88) – were christened at the City Church of St Peter and Paul during the Weimar years.

It was here that Bach began composing cantatas in earnest for performance at court, and he also provided instrumental music for the court orchestra. His early years at Weimar were happy and productive but, after 1713, relations with his employer, Duke Wilhelm Ernst, began to deteriorate and in 1717 Bach accepted



ABOVE: A romanticized artist's impression of Bach's visit to Frederick the Great at the palace of Sans Souci in Potsdam, May 1747.

with concertos for violin (including the famous Double Concerto in D minor), orchestral suites, sonatas for harpsichord, violin, and flute, the suites for solo cello and the sonatas and partitas for solo violin. These works show that Bach had thoroughly absorbed the Italian style, through intensive study of works by Corelli and Vivaldi.

## Remarriage

In May 1720, while Bach was away at a spa with his employer, Maria Barbara died suddenly. Bach remarried the next year: his bride, Anna Magdalena Wilcken (1701–60), proved a great asset to her husband, both domestically and professionally (the daughter of a musician, she was a singer, harpsichordist and music copyist). She inherited Bach's four surviving



ABOVE: Bach's eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann (1710–84), painted around 1760. Like his father, he was a composer.

the job of *Kapellmeister* to the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. The duke was so reluctant to let him go that he placed him under house arrest for a month. Eventually, in December 1717, the Bach family was allowed to leave.

## Cöthen

While most of Bach's compositions up to 1717 had been organ works and sacred cantatas, he now exploited the instrumental resources available to him at the Cöthen court. Most of his work there was secular, since the Calvinist Prince Leopold required little sacred music. Among the works he composed during this period were the six *Brandenburg Concertos* for various instrumental combinations, together



ABOVE: The trumpeter Gottfried Reiche (1667–1734), who played the high clarino parts in Bach's works in Leipzig.



children, to whom she added another 13, including another future composer, Johann Christian (1735–82), later known as the “English Bach”, since he spent much of his career there. Shortly after their marriage Bach began to compile two *Clavierbüchlein* (*Little Keyboard Books*) for his wife, which contain, among other works, the 15 Inventions and Sinfonias and several preludes and fugues, which were later assembled with others as *Das wohltemperierte Clavier* (*The Well-Tempered Clavier*).

In 1721 Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen married his cousin, and life changed irrevocably at the Cöthen court. The frivolous new princess was uninterested in music, and Bach soon felt obliged to move on – probably with some regret. In June 1722 the post of Kantor of the Thomasschule in Leipzig became vacant. The town council wanted Telemann, but he could not be released from his job at Hamburg, and so, after much deliberation, they appointed Bach. On 22 May 1723 he moved into his new quarters in the Thomasschule, where he stayed until his death 27 years later.

## Leipzig

Bach's years at Leipzig, where he was required not only to teach, but to supply music for the town's two principal churches, St Thomas and St Nicholas, were relatively uneventful, but were punctuated by acrimonious disagreements with the council over pay and conditions. Nonetheless, they were amazingly fruitful. One of his principal jobs was to write, rehearse and direct cantatas for the Sunday services at the two churches, and his output included around 250 of these substantial works for voices, chorus



ABOVE: A page from the manuscript score of Bach's St Matthew Passion, first performed in Leipzig on Good Friday in 1729.

and orchestra, mostly based on well-known Protestant chorale tunes.

In addition, he produced two magnificent settings of the Passion story, according to St Matthew and St John, the Mass in B minor, the *Christmas Oratorio*, and other major sacred works, into which he poured all the resources of vocal and instrumental writing available to him. Towards the end of his life, several books of keyboard music were published, but Bach's fame remained local. Among his last major

works were the *Goldberg Variations* for harpsichord, allegedly written for an aristocratic insomniac; *Das musicalische Opfer* (*The Musical Offering*, based on a fugue subject devised by Frederick the Great when Bach visited him at Potsdam in 1747), and the almost visionary *Kunst der Fuge* (*The Art of Fugue*), a complex series of canons on which Bach worked during the last years of his life, when his sight began to fail. He was almost totally blind when he died, leaving his widow in dire financial straits.

By the time of Bach's death, musical fashions were fast changing, and his music was perceived as antiquated. During his lifetime he had been more celebrated as an organist than as a composer. Unlike Mozart or Beethoven, he had little posthumous influence until Mendelssohn rediscovered his choral masterpieces in the 19th century, and his works began to be performed once more. He is now revered as one of the greatest of all composers.



ABOVE: A romanticized 19th-century impression of the Bach family at their morning prayers.